

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2022

Commencement Address at the University of Delaware in Newark, Delaware
May 28, 2022

Audience members. Joe! Joe! Joe!

The President. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you all. Is this working? There you go. *[Laughter]*

Before you all sit down completely, the reason why you're here is because of all of those people up in the stands. Stand up and give your parents and your grandparents, and those who got you, an applause. You owe them!

And to all the parents up in the stands, this may be the best day of all. No more tuition! *[Laughter]* But probably all of them are going to graduate school, so that probably won't work. *[Laughter]*

Dr. Assanis, trustees, faculty, the staff; my good friend—and he is my really good friend for a long time—Tommy—I call him "Tommy"—but Tom Carper—Senator Carper. Lisa Blunt Rochester, our Congresswoman who can preach—this woman can preach. And is really good. She's a great Congresswoman.

And, the class of 2022, congratulations! I know they've been recognized already, but I can't—yesterday, I did the commencement at the Naval Academy, and it reminds me today: I want a special congratulations to the veterans who are graduating today, all those who are being commissioned in the United States military. Would you please stand—of the graduating class? Stand up if you're—*[applause]*. And those of you have served as well in this class, stand up.

And for all those of you who are joining the service or about to join the finest group of warriors the world has ever seen—and that's not hyperbole; that's literally true. So thank you, thank you, thank you.

Jill—better known as Dr. Biden—I happen to be her husband—not only earned her undergraduate degree here, she also got her doctorate degree here. She got a master's in between, somewhere else. *[Laughter]* And the First Lady has continued to work full time as a professor while being the First Lady.

But, Gerret, you and I have something in common, pal: We both married way above our station. Not only can she speak five different languages, whatever language she's speaking, you'd better damn well listen, man. *[Laughter]* So, Tanya, thank you.

And I want to say this is a special day for my sister Valerie and I. She's my best friend in the world. She graduated here with honors. I graduated. *[Laughter]* Oh, that's literally true. *[Laughter]* And we took the same damn classes. *[Laughter]* We used to be 3 years apart, and now Val is 22 years younger than I am. *[Laughter]* But it feels like coming home because it is—this is home. This is home.

I once walked this campus as you did. Took the classes in the same classrooms you've taken classes. Walked the graduation ceremony just as you're walking today. Some of the best and most important years of my life were spent here.

And I had the opportunity to be taught by some great professors. I'll bet every one of you already can name one or two professors that's changed your life, that's had an impact on you in a fundamental way. I was lucky—I graduated with a dual degree in history and political science. If you add up both my GPAs in each of those, I was probably a 4.0. *[Laughter]*

But all kidding aside, Dr. Dolan, from the political science department, I think he could picture me here in the endzone, maybe catching a pass over my left shoulder, but I doubt whether ever the hell he thought I'd be standing here as President of the United States. *[Laughter]*

Although, Dr. Ingersoll is the one—you know, professors make a difference. I was asked to seek the nomination by a group of people I won't bore you with, and I thought it was a little off the wall that I was—I wasn't even old enough. And I turned—it was after a Democratic off-year convention. And I turned to the Chief Justice, who was retired—from a family that has more Senators than any family in American history: former Justice Tunnell.

And I said, "Mr. Justice, I'm not old enough." He said, "You obviously didn't do well in constitutional law, Joe." *[Laughter]* So the Constitution says you need to be 30 to be sworn in, but you can be elected at any age they want to elect you. *[Laughter]* So why the hell I did it, I wasn't sure.

But I got in a car in Dover, and I drove straight to the campus. Not a joke. And I looked up Dr. Ingersoll, one of my professors that I admired most; taught political philosophy.

And I told him the dilemma, because I hadn't thought about that at all at the time. I really hadn't. And he looked at me, and he said, "Joe, remember what Plato said." I'm thinking, "What the hell did Plato say?" *[Laughter]* And he paraphrased it. And he said: The penalty good people pay for not being involved in politics is being governed by people worse than themselves.

Folks—*[applause]*—it's what I want to talk to you all about today. Though I think even my professors would be surprised if there's a Biden School of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Delaware. Thank you, Tatiana. *[Laughter]*

But no one is more surprised than me. And while I had graduated before I—he started teaching, I wanted to acknowledge the respect and the—that I had for Dr. James Newton, a trailblazer in Black American studies and the civil rights across our Nation.

If there's one message I hope you take from me today, it's, this is no time to be on the sidelines. It's not hyperbole. I mean it from the bottom of my heart. We need all of you to get engaged in public life and the life of this Nation. Because here's the simple truth: You're graduating and entering a world at a momentous and consequential and defining time.

The next 10 years of your life are going to determine what the next 50 years of this Nation are going to look like. We're at one of those inflection points in history where things are changing so fundamentally that we have to act.

Like the Americans in the 1850s and sixties, we had to decide whether to preserve slavery or become a free nation, truly free. Like Americans in the thirties and forties—President Roosevelt had said they had a "rendezvous with destiny," at home and abroad. Like Americans in the sixties, in my generation—when I sat where you're sitting in 1965—were bitterly divided over the war in Vietnam.

We watched our heroes—two Kennedys and a King—gunned down by assassins, and still, we chose to expand the possibilities of America by breaking down unjust barriers of civil rights and voting rights.

Well, now, it's your hour. The challenges are immense—foreign and domestic—but so are the possibilities.

I spent time—more time with Xi Jinping than any world leader has—over 76 hours. We traveled 17,000 miles in China and the United States together. We were on the Tibetan Plateau, and he turned to me and said, "Can you define America for me?" And I said: "Yes, I can, in one word: possibilities." Everything is possible in America. Not a joke. Everything.

I believe that with every fiber of my being this is a decisive decade for America, at a time when we can choose the future we want, at a time when we must decide that darkness will not prevail over light.

In the last 5 years since many of you were in high school, America has faced some of its most difficult tests. A global pandemic ended a million lives in America alone—a million—and upended, according to most studies, the lives of—the personal lives of at least another 9 million children and family members and many of your lives.

And a crisis of faith in the institutions that have—however flawed they may be—serve as the infrastructure for the American experiment in liberty and self-government.

I've defined, to my foreign colleagues and heads of state, America when I was at the G-7. I said America is unique in the world. We're the only nation in the world founded on an idea. Every other nation is founded on ethnicity, religion, geography. But only America is founded on an idea: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all women and men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.

We say it so often. We've never met the goal, but we've never walked away from it, ever. And each generation has brought us closer to the goal.

And what you've been through the last 4 years—and I'm not being solicitous with you—what you've been through the last 4 years, you could not have imagined when you were graduating from high school: campus shutdowns, classes on Zoom, the world turned upside down.

But you got through it. And it took an extraordinary commitment, determination, and resolve to do it. You should be proud you overcame it all to see this day. Your generation, and this class, can do anything.

I decided to seek the Presidency. When I had concluded—I was a professor at Penn—I was never going to run again. And I meant that from the bottom of my heart. I had just lost my son Beau. And I had no interest whatsoever. And I was teaching at Penn. And then, Charlottesville.

In the United States of America, in the 20th century—21st century—people coming out of fields at night carrying torches. Close your eyes. Remember what you saw. Their veins bulging, preaching the same hate—White supremacy; chanting the same Nazi phrases—not figuratively, literally—that were being chanted in the thirties in Europe. Torches lit again.

You know, when I was a young Senator, I was proud to be the Senator who actually got Strom Thurmond to vote for the Voting Rights Act. I got it extended 25 years, and I thought: "You can bury hate. You can wipe it out." But I learned a lesson: You can't eliminate hate. It only hides when it's defeated.

But when the prominent leaders are—breathe oxygen under the rocks it's hiding in, it takes on a new life. It comes roaring back out in ways, I must tell you, I never thought would happen. Because I got into politics sitting where you're sitting because of civil rights in Delaware.

And then, nearly 4 years later, a mob of insurrectionists stormed the Capitol, the very citadel of democracy. Imagine what you'd be thinking today if you had heard this morning, before you got here, that a group of a thousand people broke down the doors of the Parliament in Great Britain, killed two police officers, smashed and ransacked the office of Members of the British Parliament or any other. What would you think? What would you think?

And then, just this month, we thought that White supremacy was finally being got hold of. Buffalo, New York: A shopping center in a Black community. I went and met with every one of those parents, every one of those families. And now, tomorrow I'll be heading to Uvalde, Texas, to meet with each of those families.

And as I speak, those parents are literally preparing to bury their children—in the United States of America—to bury their children. There's too much violence, too much fear, too much grief.

Let's be clear: Evil came to that elementary school classroom in Texas, to that grocery store in New York, to far too many places where innocents have died. In the face of such destructive forces, we have to stand stronger. We must stand stronger. We cannot outlaw tragedy, I know, but we can make America safer. We can finally do what we have to do to protect the lives of the people and of our children.

So I call on all Americans this hour to join hands and make your voices heard and work together to make this Nation what it can and should be. I know we can do this. We have done it before. You and I acted as "We the People" seeking a more perfect Union.

Always remember: Democracy is a human enterprise. We do many things well. Sometimes we fall short. That's true in our own lives; it's true in the life of the Nation. And yet democracy makes progress possible. And progress comes when we begin to see each other again, not as enemies, but as neighbors.

When I spoke yesterday at Annapolis, I finished by talking about my friend—he was my close friend; on his deathbed, asked me to do his eulogy—who would scream at each other and holler like hell at one another: John McCain. Very different views. We still loved one another.

Not as mindless, competing factions, but as fellow citizens. Learned anew, in their own—on their own time that democracy is fragile, democracy is precious, but it's also precarious.

Truth is truth. Lies are lies. And the truth is, we have a solemn duty to keep the flame of liberty burning. This is not about blue and red, rural and urban. It's about America. The right to govern ourselves. The right to determine our own destinies, to overcome division and despair, and to meet the challenges of our time with grit and, maybe equally importantly, with some grace. To press ahead determined, resolved, and full of hope.

It's not easy. It's never been. But it's who we are, a people united by an idea, unbending in the face of adversity, and devoted to creating and sustaining the beloved Nation of ours.

You don't have to take my word for it. Frederick Douglass said it better. He said, "No soil is better adapted to growth of reform than [the] American soil." The women of Seneca Falls call for suffrage by writing, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all women and men are created equal."

Dr. King said his dream of liberty for all was deeply rooted in the American Dream: the right to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness; the right to rise in the world as far as your talent can take you, unlimited by unfair barriers of privilege and power. Such are the principles of democracy, and such are the principles of America. And I don't think I'm exercising hyperbole. I've been around too long. That's what is at stake today.

The question we face is nothing less than: "Who are we?" "What do we stand for?" "What do we believe?" And maybe more importantly, "Who are we going to be?" And while this can feel like a very dark moment in America, I'm optimistic. I've never been more optimistic in my entire life. And here's why—and I mean this, my word as a Biden. I mean it. Because of you—this generation, your generation—it makes me more optimistic.

I've said it many times, as I look at my granddaughters who all graduated from universities and about to enter them—I'll say it again today: Your generation is the most generous, the most tolerant, the least prejudiced, the best educated generation this Nation has ever known. And that's a simple fact.

And it's your generation, more than anyone else, who will have to answer the question, "Who are we?" "What do we stand for?" "What do we believe?" "Who will we be?" Progress in our country has always been met with ferocious pushback from the oldest and darkest forces in America. Always.

We should not be surprised that these same forces are fighting back again, preying on hopelessness and despair; demonizing people who don't look like them; doing everything, no matter how desperate, to hold on to power. This was never going to be an easy battle, and it never has been, because it's occurred before in America.

The oldest and darkest forces in the past may believe they'll determine America's future. But I promise you—remember I said this, if you remember nothing that I said at this graduation: They are wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong.

We will, you will—in this moment, in this battle, we will not lose the right to vote, the right to self-determination, the right to choose, the right to be you, and marry the person you love. We must and will stand together to save the planet and preserve democracy.

When America was literally facing war with itself when Lincoln was President—excuse me—when Lincoln was President, Lincoln reminded us. He said, "Let's have faith that right makes might." Right makes might.

This is an essential principle of the soul of America—I mean it sincerely—the soul of America. The principle must guide you and your lives regardless of your politics—conservative or liberal—but just human decency. The principle that guides me and my administration.

For we can and will and should disagree about the means of governance. That's what democracy is about as well. But we have to be unified in the purpose of America: to create possibility, prosperity; protect decency and dignity; to be free and fair.

Just think about who we are. The bloodiest civil wars led to the abolition of slavery. Generation after generation who stood against totalitarianism and terror. And while we, the people, have undertaken great enterprises—from building interstates, to finding vaccines, to going to the stars—in all these moments, we were driven, as we are today, by the most American of principles: that we the people have created the strongest, freest, most prosperous nation the world has ever known. And again, that is not hyperbole, it's a fact.

Now, in this moment, we face our own test: to resolve—a test of resolve, a test of conscience, a test of history itself. No generation gets to choose what world they graduate into. None. But a few generations enter at a point in history where they have the power to change the trajectory of the Nation. And you can. When I sat where you are, in the mid-sixties, I believed we could. And we did, through civil rights, change the trajectory of the Nation.

And now I know that may feel like an added burden on top of all you've already been through. I'm not saying you have to shoulder the burden on your own. The task at hand and the task ahead is the work of all of us. What I am saying is, you represent the best of us. You literally represent the best of us, a better America than we are today.

A generation—your generation will not be ignored, will not be shunned; it will not be silenced. You have an opportunity to not only reaffirm, but to breathe new life into America's most important values: equality, fairness, justice.

That's what I felt like all those years ago when I sat where you are sitting today. And I mean that sincerely. I didn't think I was going to be President of the United States. It wasn't like "I'm going to be President"—although I loved reading the biographies. Everybody knew I was going to be President when I was in high school. I had no idea of it. *[Laughter]*

But for all the uncertainty in the world, this university gave me confidence in myself to engage, to get involved, because I believed I could make a difference.

My sister Valerie and I come from very modest backgrounds. A three-bedroom, split-level home in a decent neighborhood; four kids and a grandpop living with us. We never felt we were poor, but we never had—we had trouble making the tuition, which was 300 bucks a year. [Laughter] Not a joke. Or semester, I should say.

I hope you feel that way today, though, that you can change things. Because that's what I see in all of you. You can make the difference. You can lift the country up. You can meet the challenges of our time. I've always believed this Nation can be defined by one word, as I said before: possibilities. It's still true today.

And so, to the university class of 2022, there is no limit on what you can do. I promise you. So get going, for God's sake. Godspeed on your journey. Keep the faith. And take it back, please. This is yours. Take it back! We need you.

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. I really mean it—I believe in you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:24 a.m. at the University of Delaware. In his remarks, he referred to Dennis Assanis, president, University of Delaware; Gerret and Tatiana Copeland, co-owners, Bouchaine Vineyards; James E. Newton, professor, University of Delaware; Sirhan Sirhan, who was convicted of the June 5, 1968, assassination of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in Los Angeles, CA; and President Xi Jinping of China. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens, brothers James and Frank, and granddaughters Natalie, Finnegan, Naomi, and Roberta "Maisy" Biden.

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Locations: Newark, DE.

Names: Assanis, Dennis; Biden, Finnegan J.; Biden, Francis W.; Biden, James B.; Biden, Jill T.; Biden, Naomi K.; Biden, Natalie P.; Biden, Roberta M. "Maisy"; Carper, Thomas R.; Copeland, Gerret; Copeland, Tatiana; Newton, James E.; Owens, Valerie Biden; Rochester, Lisa Blunt; Sirhan, Sirhan; Xi Jinping.

Subjects: China : President; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Minorities :: Minority rights and ethnic tolerance; Civil rights : Same-sex marriage; Civil rights : Voting rights; Commerce, international : Group of Seven (G-7) nations; Delaware : President's visits; Delaware : University of Delaware in Newark; Diseases : Coronavirus, domestic prevention efforts; District of Columbia : 2021 civil unrest and violence at U.S. Capitol; Health and medical care : Abortion; Health and medical care : Research and development; Infrastructure, national improvement efforts; Law enforcement and crime : Gun violence, prevention efforts; New York : Buffalo :: Shooting; Texas : Uvalde :: Shooting; Veterans : Service and dedication; Virginia : 2017 civil unrest and violence in Charlottesville .

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